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ABSTRACT

The General Educational Development (GED) Tests date from 1942, when the United States Armed Forces Institute designed a battery of tests to provide military personnel and veterans the opportunity to obtain a credential that demonstrated proficiency on par with high school graduates. Since World War II, the GED Tests have also been beneficial to civilian high school noncompleters. The majority of employers and educational institutions accept the GED as an equivalent of the high school diploma, but some question its legitimacy. The military has stopped treating the GED as the equivalent of a high school diploma, since GED graduates do not perform on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test as well as and have a higher dropout rate from military programs than traditional high school graduates. The 2002-series GED Tests reflect the impact of welfare-to-work legislation and increased emphasis on academic standards in the K-12 community. Due to the recent trend of "adolescentization" the GED has become an alternative to completing a traditional high school education for many teenage students. The GED Testing Service and state departments of education should strongly consider raising the minimum age to be eligible to take GED Tests to 18. Educators must strive to prevent students from leaving traditional high school programs to take GED Tests under the misconception that a GED credential is easier to gain. (YLB)

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Are the GED Tests a High School Equivalency or a High School Alternative?

by Millard Juette Bingham

The GED tests date from 1942, when the examination staff of the United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI) developed a battery of tests designed to measure the major and lasting outcomes generally thought to be associated with a high school education. The USAFI worked jointly with the American Council on Education, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and regional accrediting associations. The GED Tests were primarily formed to provide military personnel and veterans the opportunity to obtain a credential that demonstrated proficiency on par with high school graduates. Since 1942 more than 14 million adults have earned GED diplomas (American Council on Education, 2001).

The American Council on Education hoped that employers and educational institutions would accept the GED credential. Their hopes have been fulfilled. More than 95 percent of employers in the United States say they hire GED graduates on the same basis as high school graduates and 90% of colleges and universities accept the GED as equal to a traditional high school credential (American Council on Education, 2001). This acceptance of the GED allowed military personnel to quickly return to civilian life and become involved in educational and vocational pursuits. The GED testing program, established in 1945 and administered by the Veteran's Testing Service under the policy direction of the Commission on Accreditation of Service Experiences of the

American Council on Education, proved to be a significant aid to returning military personnel who had not finished high school.

After World War II it became apparent that the GED Tests could also be of benefit to civilians who had not completed high school. By 1959, veterans and servicemen had become the minority of GED test takers. In 1963, the Veterans Testing Service was renamed the General Educational Development Testing Service (Patience & Whitney, 1982).

Since 1963, the GED Testing Service has guided and directed a program, which now serves more than 800,000 test takers annually at approximately 3,200 GED Testing Centers. Testing is also provided for military personnel stationed overseas, persons confined in correctional and health institutions, and U.S. civilians and foreign nationals overseas (American Council on Education, 2000).

Although the majority of employers and educational institutions accept the GED as an equivalent of the high school diploma, some have also questioned the legitimacy of a GED. "The military has even stopped treating the GED as the equivalent of a high school diploma" (Gehring, 2002). This is due to the fact that it has been found that GED graduates do not perform as well as high school graduates on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test and also due to GED graduates having a higher dropout rate from military programs than traditional high school graduates. The GED Testing Service must periodically update the GED Tests by upgrading the standards in order for it to reflect the knowledge and abilities that high school graduates possess. Graduating high school seniors serve as the norm group for which passing scores on the GED Tests are determined. Passing

scores on the GED Tests are set so that one-third of graduating seniors would not pass the GED Tests. The majority of States in the United States require an average score of 45, an overall total of 225 points, and a minimum score of 40 on each of the five GED Tests.

GED test questions are classified according to Bloom's (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. The GED Tests measure students' skills in comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The comprehension items on the GED Tests measure the test-taker's ability to restate information, summarize ideas, identify implications, and draw conclusions. Comprehension items are found on all five GED Tests.

All GED Tests require the skill of application. Application questions require the ability to use information and ideas in concrete situations. Analysis test items require the examinee to be able to break down information and explore relationships between ideas. Analysis items measure the examinee's ability to distinguish facts from hypotheses or opinions, to recognize unstated assumptions, to distinguish a conclusion from supporting statements, to identify cause-and-effect relationships, to make comparisons and contrasts, and to make a series of related inferences.

Synthesis items on the GED Tests require the production of information in the form of hypotheses, theories, stories, or compositions. Only the Essay section of the Writing Skills Test requires the skill of synthesis. Evaluation items on the GED Tests require the skill or ability to be able to make judgments about the

validity or accuracy of information. Evaluation items are present only on the Social Studies and Science Tests.

The GED Tests measure the use of information as opposed to simply the recall of information. The GED Tests focus on higher-level thinking skills and are designed to be relevant to adults and to be as practical and realistic as possible. The GED Tests are designed to reflect the key themes of which an educated adult should be aware. Two major themes that the Tests seek to address are the global nature of our society and the impact of technology upon modern society (American Council on Education, 2000).

In January of 2002, a new series of GED Tests will be implemented. All students who have passed previous sections of the GED but not the complete battery will have prior scores invalidated and will have to retest using the new 2002-series GED Tests. The 2002-series GED Tests reflect the impact of welfare-to-work legislation and the increased emphasis on academic standards in the K-12 community.

The 2002-series GED Tests will incorporate the use of a calculator with one section of the Mathematics Test. The Literature and the Arts section of the GED Tests will change to reflect a kinship in the content area of Language Arts. GED candidates will also be exposed to business-related and adult-context information texts across all five tests. The Social Studies Test will include excerpts from the *Declaration of Independence*, the *U.S. Constitution*, the *Federalist Papers*, or a key Supreme Court decision (American Council on Education, 1999).

These aforementioned changes are meant to reflect the skills and competencies that high school graduates possess. These changes will allow GED graduates to prove that they are ready to embark upon career or higher education endeavors. The GED Tests offer adult students a second chance in achieving a formal education. Researchers are constantly trying to determine whether GED graduates are really equally equipped as high school graduates. There are no doubts, however, that GED graduates benefit greatly from receiving the GED credential. Many doors swing open for GED graduates that were previously closed, such as access to higher education institutions, promotions, and advancements.

The GED Tests were primarily designed to serve as a second-chance education program for adults that were unable to complete high school, but due to the recent trend of "adolescentization" *the GED has become an alternative to completing a traditional high school education* for many teenage students. Some high school students see the GED as a quicker way to gain access to higher education, while still others view it as an easier alternative to remaining in high school. The researcher recommends that the GED Testing Service and individual state departments of education to strongly consider raising the minimum age to be eligible to take the GED Tests to 18. This would counter the trend of high school students being lured away from traditional high school programs in order to take the GED Tests.

Some students have the view that obtaining the GED is a simple matter. They seem to view that obtaining a GED is as easy as placing an order at the

drive-through window of a fast-food restaurant. Clearly, it is not so easy to gain a GED credential, but steps must be taken to combat this misconception. Many students are leaving or dropping-out of high school just to take the GED Tests. This was never the goal of the GED Tests. Many of these students who are dropping out may find it difficult if not impossible to pass the Official GED Tests. Educators must strive to prevent students from leaving traditional high school programs for the wrong reasons. The GED Tests are a viable second chance at an educational credential, but the researcher feels that a high school diploma is obviously preferable. The fact that the United States military is no longer accepting the GED on par with a high school diploma supports the researcher's opinion or preference of the traditional high school diploma.

Many teenage students attend GED preparation classes due to being strongly encouraged by parents or because of a court order via Youth Court, while other adult students attend in order to maintain receipt of welfare benefits. Adult education theory tends to focus on adults who have assumed adult social roles. Also, adult education theory and philosophy assumes that the adult student has a readiness to learn. Malcolm Knowles (1980) proposed that learning programs for adults "should be sequenced according to the learners' readiness to learn" (p. 44). It has been argued that adult education can not be mandatory, but a substantial portion of the GED student population is attending because attendance is mandatory or because they are coerced to attend in order to continue to receive public assistance. Brockett (1992) takes the stand that mandatory continuing education violates the central principles of adult education.

Brockett further elaborates that mandatory continuing education creates a punitive attitude toward participation in adult education. Just as continuing education should not be mandatory, nor should adult basic education. "When receipt of public assistance is tied to one's participation in an adult basic education program, a plan with good intentions quickly becomes a way to manipulate individuals who already are likely to feel disenfranchised" (Brockett, 1992, p. 90). Mandatory adult education results often in an angry and unmotivated learner. These mandated participants can quickly spread their discontent to other learners that once possessed enthusiasm for learning Brockett's warnings appear to be quite prophetic.

As the GED student population gets younger, adult education theory and assumptions increasingly do not always apply. Perhaps soon educators in the GED arena will have to disregard andragogical principles entirely and revert to more pedagogical techniques. As the largest age cohort of GED test-takers continues to be 19 years of age and younger in most states, GED preparation classes are looking more and more like traditional high school classrooms than adult education classes (American Council on Education, 2001b).

The GED Tests are a wonderful second chance at an education for many adults. Oftentimes, passing the GED Tests provides an impetus for adult learners to pursue further education. Although there are many positives to the GED Tests, we can not ignore or turn a blind eye to dangerous trends. The growing youthfulness of GED test-takers is an ominous trend and we as adult educators must strive to counter this alarming trend.

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